

# YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BESIDES ME

*SERIES: ELIJAH: AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD'S GRACE*

by Ron Ritchie

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The more I study the Scriptures, the more I am amazed at three spiritual truths that challenge my life. First, I am overwhelmed by the loving heart of God for the redemption of a humanity which in his sight is "dead in [its] trespasses and sin" (Ephesians 2:1). Humanity is not even aware that it is dead in its trespasses and sin, and we have to realize that it is only by the grace and mercy of God that we ourselves are now sons of God, knowing that we were once where they are now.

God fulfills his gracious plan of redemption and reveals his life to sinful humanity through nature, his Spirit, his Son, and as we will see in particular today, his people. That is the second amazing spiritual truth. He places a holy people on earth in each generation as salt to arrest decay and to add flavor to humanity. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus reminded his Jewish disciples in Matthew 5:13. And in order for his saints to become effective as the salt of the earth, they were called upon in Israel and are called upon in the church of Jesus Christ to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). And along with that calling, God has commanded his holy people, his spiritual children, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

The third spiritual truth is that we are placed all around the earth. When God called his saints, first in the nation of Israel and now in the church, to be the salt of the earth, he really meant "of the earth." He puts his saints in all kinds of places in every country of the earth—from the slave markets of Egypt to the palaces of Babylon, from the high business towers of great corporations in San Francisco to the slums of Calcutta. He also places us in all kinds of circumstances which we would never choose for ourselves, but in which by faith we are willing to trust God to use us as the salt that transmits the loving character of Jesus Christ. As the salt of the earth we have been called to be in the world but not of the world (see 1 John 2:15-17).

These wonderful truths are going to be demonstrated in the lives of two salty saints in 1 Kings 18:1-19, but before we look at them I want to share with you a wonderful story as told by Doug Goins about one of Jesus Christ's salty saints from our own body, Bunny Blake Grey, who loved the Lord God with all her heart.

It is a privilege to tell you about this sister of ours who was part of our church family for close to twenty years. Bunny Blake Grey went home to be with the Lord about three weeks ago at age fifty-four. She died of cancer. Of the two hundred or so gathered for her memorial service, the Christians were probably a distinct minority. As a matter of fact, the predominant group in attendance was the homosexual and lesbian community of the peninsula.

You see, for the last several years of her life, Bunny had given herself as a counselor with the Aris Project on the mid-Peninsula. She had been a grief counselor with men and women dying of AIDS. And so in the hour that we spent together, most of the folks who spoke about Bunny's life were nonbelievers.

Several believers including Steve Zeisler got the chance to speak about Bunny's relationship to God, her love of our church family, and her faithfulness in ministry here.

Most of the people who spoke didn't know the Lord, the fact that Bunny did know Jesus Christ and had him at the center of her life was very clear to them. A homosexual ex-priest spoke profoundly of how secure she was in God's love and in her relationship with him through Jesus Christ. He said that was the reason Bunny could love people unconditionally and pour her life out for little children and people dying of AIDS.

Bunny was a woman who really was the salt of the earth. Every place she went she made a difference, whether

it was the work place or the homes of the families she was invited into as they faced the realities of death from AIDS. She really illustrated the calling we have to be salt wherever God puts us.

Now let's review the context in which the life of the salty saint Elijah takes place. God had informed his people through his prophet Moses, as we saw earlier, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the LORD your God in the midst of you is a jealous God...." (Deuteronomy 6:5,13-15).

However, in the days of the divided kingdom, 1 Kings 16:30f tells us that (beginning in 869 BC) Ahab, the seventh king of the northern tribes "...did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him...he married Jezebel...and went to serve Baal and worshiped him....and...also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before Him." So God sent his prophet Elijah to confront King Ahab. He was a man of prayer and moved and ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Elijah met King Ahab, he told him that because of Ahab's idolatry God would cause the heavens to become as brass as he had promised Israel through Moses some five hundred years earlier, just before they entered the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 28:23-24). The Lord then moved his prophet out of harm's way by sending him south into the desert, and then up to "Baal Country" where his faith was strengthened as he watched God meet his daily needs through a brook and a flock of ravens and a gentile widow.

Meanwhile, the Jews in Israel who were seeking to worship both Jehovah and Baal, as well as the pure Baal worshippers, were having a difficult time getting Baal himself to release any rain in Israel or to raise any of the dead.

Now as we open 1 Kings 18:1-19, finally God speaks to his prophet Elijah and tells him to appear before King Ahab again. We are going to find in the midst of Israel's spiritual and physical drought a small "remnant" of God's men and women who, regardless of the religious, political, social, or physical pressure, refused to bow their knee to Baal or to run away because of the deaths of the prophets by the hand of Jezebel. One of the first godly people we are going to meet is a man named Obadiah.

### **Obadiah: Servant of King Ahab**

1 Kings 18:1-6

Now it came about after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth." So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. And Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly; for it came about, when Jezebel destroyed the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water.) Then Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys; perhaps we will find grass and keep the horses and mules alive, and not have to kill some of the cattle." So they divided the land between them to survey it; Ahab went one way by himself and Obadiah went another way by himself.

As the curtain opens, three years and six months have gone by since God's prophet Elijah has spoken to the king. King Ahab knew that there would be no rain until Elijah spoke again. First Kings 17:1 told us that Elijah had said to King Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." The one and only living God had given those three years and six months of physical drought to the northern kingdom to discipline them because of their disobedience in following after other gods, but also with the hope that once the discipline was over, the king and the people of God would repent of their sin of idolatry and come back into a loving relationship with him. This is a wonderful picture of the grace and mercy of God.

This spiritual principle is clearly seen in the words of Proverbs 3:11 as commented on by the writer to the Hebrews in 12:5-11:

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD,  
Nor faint when you are reproved by Him;  
For those whom the LORD loves He disciplines,  
And He scourges every son whom He receives."

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Right in the midst of this corrupt society and evil court was the man of God Obadiah, whose Hebrew name means The Servant (or Worshiper) of Jehovah. He was Ahab's chief of staff and a God-fearing servant of Jehovah at the same time.

After three years and six months all the crops had failed and all the brooks had dried up. The famine was so severe that King Ahab was forced to personally look for water for his livestock and especially his horses, which were essential to pull the thousands of chariots he had in his military arsenal. So he left the palace with his trusted official Obadiah. And typically of a man in sin, Ahab still thought he could solve the water problem on his own, and probably the last word one might have heard as he and Obadiah left the palace was, "If you want something done right you have to do it yourself." Then the king told Obadiah to go one way and he would go the other way looking for some source of water in the valleys and hills of Samaria. The sin of idolatry caused the king to have both spiritual blindness and intellectual blindness, forcing him to look for water in all the wrong places. He was looking horizontally---but we are called to look vertically into the face of the living God Jehovah.

The word of God is filled with wonderful stories of men and women who held on to their faith in the midst of a society that almost to a man had sold out to idolatry and evil. These are men and women whom God placed in a variety of evil circumstances in order to pour out salt into the "soup" of society, as well as into the community of believers. Very few were able to leave those evil circumstances, and yet they remained faithful to God all their lives.

I am deeply concerned that many Christians have not learned how to live in the world while not becoming part of it. In a spirit of fear they keep pulling back into a fortress mentality---changing jobs, neighborhoods, and schools and surrounding themselves only with Christians, hoping to save themselves and their children from the current corruption. As well, I find them critical of other Christians who are seeking to salt down their communities with the hope that some will come to salvation in Christ Jesus. But even though we have never seen as much evil come forth in a single generation as in this one, this is a time God has provided for Christians to come together not in fear but in prayer, like Elijah.

Let me just remind you of some men and women whom God placed as salt and light within the courts of idolatrous kings and queens. They were placed in those positions not just to save the nation but to bring the light of salvation to many men and women in those nations.

Joseph the son of Jacob was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and ended up in Egypt as a servant in the household of the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard, where he was falsely accused of making a move on the captain's wife. He was jailed but became an administrator and interpreter of dreams. This gift moved him into the house of Pharaoh, who in time said to Joseph, "'You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you'....And he set him over

all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 41:41-43.)

Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in a basket in the weeds of the Nile river, raised him, and had him educated in all the learning of the Egyptians. "...He was a man of power in words and deeds...." (Acts 7:22.) However, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin...." (Hebrews 11:24-25).

Esther was a humble Jewish girl who by the power and protection of the living God of Israel was raised up to become the queen of Persia, and within that evil society she was able to save the Jewish community from death and destruction at the hand of their enemies.

Daniel as a young man was taken as a Jewish slave into the Babylonian captivity, only to be raised by God as a prophet and an interpreter of dreams for the king. He was placed by God in positions of power and influence in both the Babylonian and the Persian Empires. He lived long enough to see his people return to Israel after the seventy years of Babylonian captivity.

We don't have time to do more than mention a few of all the men and women from every walk of life in God's hall of fame, those he placed in a variety of locations, trades, and positions to salt down a decaying society in their generation. Philip, the Jewish waiter with a Greek accent, was sent by God to the hated Samaritans as well as to the Ethiopian eunuch. Paul, the converted Jew, was sent with the gospel of Jesus Christ to a gentile seller of purple in Philippi named Lydia as well as to the jailer and his family. And then there were all the new Christians in the household of Caesar Nero. And there were many more who, coming into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, had to stay where they were the rest of their lives (or even lose their lives for the sake of Christ), but salted down their part of society to the glory of God as long as they were allowed to live on this earth. Such was our sister Bunny Blake Grey.

President Jorge Serrano of Guatemala was the first Protestant Christian in history to be democratically elected to the presidency of a Latin American country. Serrano holds degrees from Stanford, the ACE University of Texas, and the University of Stockholm. But like politicians everywhere he has his critics, some of the most outspoken his fellow evangelical Christians. "My life was complicated by people who insisted that I ought to leave politics...but every time I was subjected to this type of pressure I became conscious of a clear conviction that...being a Christian and being a politician were two perfectly compatible activities." (*News Network International*, 1992.)

Paul told the Athenians, "...[God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist..." (Acts 16:26-28). And then God uses people like you and me in every generation to salt down our generation so that humanity can come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I'm sure many of the faithful remnant had a problem with Obadiah's serving in the court of King Ahab and Jezebel. But God certainly doesn't express that view; what is recorded in his word is that Obadiah never bowed his knee to Baal because he was a servant of the one and only living God of Israel.

### **Obadiah: Servant of the living God**

1 Kings 18:7-19

Now as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him, and he recognized him and fell on his face and said, "Is this you, Elijah my master?" And he said to him, "It is I. Go, say to your master, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'" And he said, "What sin have I committed, that you are giving your servant into the hand of Ahab, to put me to death? As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent to search for you; and when they said, 'He is not here', he made the kingdom or nation swear that they could not find you. And

now you are saying, 'Go, say to your master, "Behold, Elijah is here.'" And it will come about when I leave you that the Spirit of the LORD will carry you where I do not know; so when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth. Has it not been told to my master what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, that I hid a hundred prophets of the LORD by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water? And now you are saying, 'Go, say to your master, "Behold, Elijah is here"'; he will then kill me." And Elijah said, "As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today."

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came about, when Ahab saw Elijah that Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel? And he said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and you have followed the Baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

Elijah the prophet of Jehovah was moving south from the town of Zarephath toward the capital city of Samaria as ordered by the Lord, while Obadiah the servant of Ahab was moving north looking for water, when these two godly men (whose names meant, respectively, "My God is Jehovah" and "The Servant of Jehovah") met on a main road. Not only was Obadiah a servant of Jehovah and a servant of Ahab, but he also looked up to Elijah as his master. Now Elijah asked him to turn back from looking for water and tell King Ahab that Elijah was back in town and wanted to speak to him. Once again we see the discipline of God as well as the grace of God extended toward his son Israel. The drought could have lasted years longer and driven the people into the ground. But God apparently allowed it to last just long enough to get the attention of the king and the people who were trying to worship Jehovah and "The Storm God," Baal, at the same time and discovering that praying to Baal was a bust.

Obadiah cried out to Elijah and confronted him over three issues: First, he asked him what sin he had committed against Elijah that Elijah would now turn him over to the lions by making him go back and tell the king he was in town. Second, he told Elijah that for the last three and a half years King Ahab had had an APB (all points bulletin) on the prophet and that anyone who saw him should arrest him on sight. Ahab had even had his men go to the surrounding nations and kingdoms to find the prophet, and when they could not find him they had that nation or kingdom swear by these gods that they could not find him. And finally, Obadiah told Elijah that he knew of the character of the Spirit of God, and he was sure that if he went back to Ahab and told him he had found the prophet, Ahab would come out to meet his enemy only to discover that the Spirit of God had taken the prophet somewhere else, and Obadiah would be standing before the king holding an empty bag, his life forfeit. (see II Kings 2:16, Ezekiel 3:12-14, Acts 8:39-40)

Obadiah then reminded Elijah of who he was: "I...your servant have feared the LORD from my youth." This dear servant of God had probably given his life to the Lord in his teens, then had been hired by the court of King Ahab, and had worked his way up the ladder to a position of honor and authority, never once in all those years bowing his knee to Baal. He continued, "May I please remind you that I am the one who hid a hundred prophets of the Lord in some caves and fed them all during the time Jezebel was killing every godly prophet she could find?" It was at great risk to his own life from the hand of Queen Jezebel that he did this. He was of the same character as Corrie Ten Boom of Holland, who during the second world war had to make a decision to offer refuge to the Jews in the hiding place on the top floor of her father's watch shop rather than listen to the orders of the Nazis or her church to turn them out.

Obadiah then tried to show Elijah that what the prophet was asking him to do was paramount to suicide. But Elijah responded, "As the LORD of hosts [or the LORD Almighty] lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." And so, based on Elijah's promise, Obadiah went and found the king and told him that he had met the long-lost prophet and that he wanted to speak to the king that day.

When Ahab saw him he was angry: "Is this you, you troubler of Israel [you who have put a hex on Israel]?" Neither Obadiah nor Ahab had seen Elijah for three years and six months, and apparently he had changed

physically so that he was not easy to recognize. But the first words out of Ahab's mouth were to call the prophet of God a "troubler of Israel." "So, Elijah, it's you," he said. "Well, I want to tell you something. We have had nothing but trouble since the last time I saw you. This kingdom has really suffered greatly because of you. We have lost our export trade. We have lost our lawns and flower beds. Our forests have dried up. Our livestock has been dying. Our people are getting very angry at our priests; they are frustrated because Baal is not answering their prayers for rain. And Jezebel and I are not getting along that well-all because of this drought you caused!"

Elijah was called the troubler of Israel by Ahab because he had been instructed by God to blow the cover off of Ahab's idolatry and show the nation that while in their sight what the king was doing was fine, in the sight of God what he was doing was evil. And salty followers of Christ will be called the same thing in our day among those in the church who are living in sin as well as others in their communities. Notice that Ahab never saw that he himself "did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). He was blinded by his sin of idolatry to the fact that the drought was a fulfillment of the curses that God had promised Israel if they walked in disobedience against him. So Ahab picked out a scapegoat named Elijah and told all his people that Elijah was the one who had put the hex on the nation.

But Elijah reminded Ahab, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and you have followed the Baals." There were two things he was telling Ahab: (1) "The drought is here because of your father's sin." (2) "The drought is here because of your sin. And the sin is that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord; followed the Baals; and led the nation of Israel into idolatry, sexual immorality, and demon worship."

Last week I had a pastor from another city as a house guest. He told me that recently a Christian man in his church had begun to tell him that he did not like his style of preaching and teaching and that he was not a "warm" pastor. Then a few weeks later the man had approached this pastor again and admitted that the real issue was not the pastor's style or warmth but that his preaching was laying open the man's idolatrous lifestyle. My friend in a real sense was a "troubler" of the church, especially for this struggling Christian who was trying to worship both Jesus and Baal.

"Now, speaking of the god of rain," Elijah continued, "send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." All Israel was to meet with Elijah at the top of Mount Carmel because many of them were trying to worship both the living God of Israel and Baal. They were to meet at the top of Mount Carmel because they had replaced the altar to Jehovah and built an altar to Baal, "The Storm God," and Asherah, "The Lady of the Sea." The prophet wanted to give them the advantage of the field. And since Mount Carmel was some 1,732 feet above sea level overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the coast of Israel and Lebanon, they would be closer to "The Storm God" so that they could call down rain on the earth that was now as hard as iron.

As they prepared to approach the field, an audience of vacillating Jews saw that the teams were made up of 850 priests of Baal and Asherah defending the eastern goal, and God's prophet Elijah defending the western goal. This could have been very scary for Elijah if he had not had the full confidence that God would work in and through him. Elijah also had the history of how God not only dealt with Israel in their sin but also graciously protected them in times of crisis from their enemies. He had the history of Moses and how God had defeated all the gods of Egypt as well as its army at the parting of the Red Sea. He had the history of Joshua and how God had defeated the Canaanite city of Jericho with a shout and the sound of trumpets. He had the history of Gideon and how God had defeated 135,000 Midianites with 300 men, some vessels and candles, and a trumpet. And he had the history of David and how God had used him to defeat Goliath and the Philistines. Most of all, although Elijah was a natural man, he had the security that he was serving the living God, and as God's prophet he could go to him in prayer and expect God to answer his prayers.

God has called us out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins (see Colossians 1:13). We have been called to love the Lord God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might and to follow no other gods besides him.

Our Lord Jesus has told us that we are "the salt of the earth" and that our task is to choose by the power of the

Holy Spirit to seek to penetrate all levels of society to arrest corruption and to add flavor both to the church of Jesus Christ and to a fallen humanity

God is sovereign and has placed us in this community as little grains of salt, and each day we need to be encouraged to be thankful and mindful of why he has placed us in these positions so that we will not be tempted to run away each time we experience a little pressure or corruption. We are to pray for and rejoice with fellow Christians in positions we may not always like or agree with, who are seeking to serve the living God according to their lights in the same way we are seeking to serve him. But wherever we have been placed on this earth as salt in our generation, may our lives reflect the very life of our risen Lord who lives within us and who desires that we remain a holy people and faithful to him as we wait for his return to this earth as King of kings.

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